

‘There comes a point where people just can’t cope’: Exploring the views and experiences of frontline officers

Matthew Callender, Bernadette Doran, Laura Knight and David Hill
Institute of Public Safety, Crime and Justice, University of Northampton, UK

BACKGROUND

There is a significant positive correlation between job satisfaction and job performance (Judge, 2001). Organisations which employ frontline staff benefit by creating an environment where employees can successfully prosper, have a sense of purpose and enjoy a fulfilling working life (Robertson & Cooper, 2011). If organisations succeed in this respect, they can expect dedication and optimum productivity in return.



Previous research has stated that the voices of the frontline have often been missed, ignored or dismissed (Hoggett *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, research has observed when frontline voices are discussed they are often framed negatively as forming a cultural barrier that creates resistance to change, and consequently their marginalisation is seen as unproblematic by some.



AIMS

The research aimed to explore:

- **motivations** and factors influencing **job satisfaction**;
- **communication** of change;
- **operational experiences**; and
- **partnership working** across the different participating agencies engaged in the criminal system.

This poster provides an overview of findings relating to the theme of frontline wellbeing.

METHOD

Semi-structured interviews were completed with 27 frontline staff - 23 police staff and 4 fire staff. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes in length and were digitally recorded and transcribed.



Transcripts were thematically analysed involving six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006): ‘familiarisation’ through reading and re-reading transcripts, ‘code generation’, ‘theme identification’, ‘review’ of themes and codes, ‘labelling themes’ and ‘report writing’.

The research took place in one local authority area in England, located in the Midlands. Like many other local authorities, the relevant organisations are being reconstituted in light of the economic climate.

Motivations and job satisfaction

Participants were **passionate** about delivering positive outcomes. Frequent reports of **stress** shaped levels of job satisfaction. An imbalance between job demands and the organisational **recognition of the value** was identified.

“...there comes a point where people just can't cope and the managers need to be very aware of that”

Communication of change

Organisations were in a **constant state of change**, but the frontline had a **limited understanding** of the rationale for change. **Consultation** with the frontline was perceived to be getting better, but was articulated as being **tokenistic** in the main.

“...it doesn't matter what opinion you have on it, that is what will happen, so feedback going back up the line doesn't happen”

FINDINGS



HEADLINE: Frontline wellbeing was a key theme identified in the analysis, shaping the experiences and perspectives of frontline officers.



Operational experiences

Participants raised concerns about **reductions in staffing levels**. Organisational focus was exclusively on performance, with **wellbeing not prioritised**. Frontline risks had changed, epitomised through an **increase in violence**.

“...They're much more willing to be violent to you than when I joined... I think there's a much greater chance of being assaulted now”

Partnership working

A culture of **shifting responsibility** to others was identified, disregarding the implications to the wider system. The benefits of police, fire and paramedics **having one core set of skills** was highlighted, but the retention of a **distinct identity** for each service was emphasised.

“you've got to be careful how you join these things together because you can't expect policemen to be... putting out fires”

DISCUSSION: The frontline was passionate about delivering positive outcomes for communities and people in need, but it was apparent that some are struggling to cope with levels of pressure. Leadership is one of the key drivers for employee wellbeing, specifically, knowing enough to be able to know when things are not right and having the skills to intervene. Training may help individual agencies to understand disparate social identities (we are here to extinguish fire; we are here to fight crime) in order to establish a shared identity (we are here to save lives). Strategic leadership teams must enter into an on-going dialogue to discuss the importance and impact of welfare and wellbeing.

Contact Details:

For further information about this study, please contact:
matthew.callender@northampton.ac.uk or laura.knight@northampton.ac.uk

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